United Nations A/56/299

General Assembly

Distr.: General
15 August 2001

Original: English

Fifty-sixth session
Item 136 of the provisional agenda*
Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General on the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of intergovernmental bodies**

Summary

The present report compiles information received from intergovernmental bodies on the availability of their pre-session documentation and the review process with their author departments. By nature this is an interim report. Upon completion of the biennial cycle of meetings, a more comprehensive analysis will facilitate the drawing of conclusions. Nonetheless, the present report draws some early lessons and points to directions for the future, comprehensive report.

* A/56/150.
** The preparation of the present report was delayed awaiting replies from intergovernmental bodies.

01-51255 (E) 200801

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 55/222 of 23 December 2000, invited intergovernmental bodies, during their organizational sessions or other appropriate periods before the commencement of their substantive work, to review with author departments the question of the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of those bodies, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session through the Committee on Conferences (resolution 55/222, sect. III, para. 4).

2. In order to facilitate the reporting, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences, following communications within the Secretariat, addressed a letter (see annex I) to the chairpersons of intergovernmental bodies inviting them to respond to the above request. Replies received by 10 August 2001 are summarized in annex II to the present report.

3. The request of the General Assembly relates to pre-session documentation, which should be available in all official languages six weeks before the opening of the session.

4. Owing to the biennial cycle of meetings and the working schedules of many of the intergovernmental bodies concerned, it has not been possible to obtain responses from all of them. More responses are expected once a full reporting cycle has been completed. At that time, a comprehensive picture can be obtained, allowing for analysis and the submission of recommendations for consideration by the General Assembly.

5. Already at this stage, however, distinctions can be made between the various organs and the degree to which their work is affected by the availability of pre-session documentation. Bodies meeting as and when required are in a different situation vis-à-vis the availability of pre-session documentation than those meeting according to set timetables with pre-set agendas, such as the Main Committees of the General Assembly. Organs taking up reports from their subsidiary bodies, organs that consider reports originating in the Secretariat and other bodies discussing reports from special rapporteurs all have different needs in terms of documentation.

6. It is also clear that the level and intensity of coordination between the secretariats and bureaux of intergovernmental bodies, on the one hand, and the Secretariat and conference services, on the other, can have a significant impact on the availability of documentation. It is expected that the preparation of draft reports and the processing of pre-session documentation will become a more timely and orderly exercise as the planning meetings, which are held three months prior to the opening of the session, become routine.

7. Reduction in the number of reports requested by intergovernmental bodies can also contribute to timely issuance of pre-session documentation. As recommended many times, biennial or triennial reviews and the rationalizing of the programmes of work could facilitate more timely and substantive reporting.

Annex I

Letter of the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to chairpersons of intergovernmental bodies

I am writing to bring to your attention a number of requests and recommendations the Committee on Conferences made at its substantive session held in August 2000,[a] some of them reiterated in General Assembly resolution 55/222 on Pattern of Conferences, adopted by the Assembly on 22 December 2000 on the recommendation of the Fifth Committee.

In paragraph 21 of its report, the Committee on Conferences recommended that chairpersons institute time limits for the presentation of standard documents of the Secretariat.

In paragraph 44, the Committee again urged intergovernmental bodies to spare no effort at the planning stage to take into account meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, making provision for such meetings in their programmes of work and notifying conference services well in advance of any cancellations in order that conference-servicing resources may, to the extent possible, be reassigned to meetings of regional and other major groupings of States. The same request was reiterated by the General Assembly in paragraph 8, section II, of its resolution 55/222.

In paragraph 46, the Committee requested the Chairperson to write to the chairpersons of intergovernmental bodies, bringing to their attention the need to anticipate requests for meetings of regional and other major groupings during their session and thus allow for adequate consultations of regional and other major groupings if their work programme so requires.

In paragraphs 98 through 102 of its report, the Committee dealt with the availability of documentation in accordance with the six-week rule, a concern also addressed in paragraphs 1 to 7 and 9 to 12 of section III of General Assembly resolution 55/222. In paragraph 4 of section III of that resolution, the General Assembly invited intergovernmental bodies, during their organizational sessions or other appropriate periods before the commencement of the substantive work, to review with author departments the question of the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of those bodies and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session through the Committee on Conferences.

Thank you for your attention and usual cooperation with the Committee on Conferences in the implementation of the above requests and recommendations. In case you need clarification or would like to communicate any feedback to the Committee on Conferences, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me or with the secretary of the Committee.

Abdelmalek **Bouheddou**
Chairman

[a] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 32* (A/55/32).

Annex II

Summary of replies received to the letter of the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences

The Sixth Committee of the General Assembly reports that a note by the Secretariat is issued in advance of each session listing documents and relevant information relating to the items allocated to the Committee. The Secretariat convenes informal consultations for delegations to exchange views on the organization of work and status of documentation prior to the commencement of each session of the Committee. While efforts are always made to comply with the six-week deadline, in some instances it is not possible to do so. This is due, inter alia, to late receipt of requested information relevant for the compilation of the reports and the need to include information relating to meetings of certain intergovernmental bodies which are held close to or after the deadline for the submission of such reports.

At each session, the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly review and approve their programmes of work as well as documentation requirements for the two sessions, which are revised and updated as necessary. Then, before each session, reports on status of documentation for each Committee are circulated as documents of the General Assembly. The organization of work is then prepared taking such information into account.

Close interaction also exists between Secretariat teams and the First and Fourth Committees. Though no formal documentation review meetings were convened, document submission and processing are closely monitored and potential problems are promptly dealt with.

The Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization and the Ad Hoc Committee established by resolution 51/210 carry out their work in the first half of each year and their reports are considered by the Sixth Committee in the second half of the year. As a result, the reports of these Committees are available well in advance of the meetings of the Sixth Committee.

The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People reports that the Committee needs to meet throughout the year as circumstances require. It submits its annual report under the agenda item "Question of Palestine". Prior to submitting its report to the Assembly, it is discussed and approved by the bureau of the Committee and adopted at one of the Committee meetings. The report adopted by the Committee is usually submitted for processing around mid-October each year.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs reported that the Chairman and the bureau monitored the preparation of the documentation for the forty-fourth regular session of the Commission during the inter-sessional meetings. As a result, the documentation was available to the Member States in time for the regular session. The fact that the Chairman and bureau of the Commission were elected at the end of the forty-third session had facilitated the process of consultation on all matters related to the forty-fourth session, including the timely preparation and distribution of documentation.

The Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice underscored its efforts to curtail and streamline its reporting requirements by normally not requesting more than one report on each agenda item and one report per priority theme and by considering certain topics on a biennial basis. The Chairman of the Commission and the bureau have monitored the preparation of the documentation for the resumed session of the Commission, which is to be convened in September 2001. The documents have been submitted for processing 10 weeks prior to the resumed session.

The International Trade Law Branch of the Office of Legal Affairs reported that the letter from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences would be delivered to the new Chairman of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, elected on 25 June 2001. The secretariat confirmed, however, that UNCITRAL has been following all the procedures set forth in the letter to the chairman. The only exception may be availability of all documents in accordance with the six-week rule. The main reason was identified as under-staffing, which had prevented the meeting of the 10-week deadline for submission of documents.

The United Nations Military Staff Committee generally meets on a biweekly basis. Documentation for the Committee consists of translation of its meeting records. Other documents in support of its work are occasionally submitted for translation.

The Committee on Information reported that its bureau was duly informed by the Department for Public Information three months prior to the beginning of its twenty-third session of the reports of the Secretary-General to be considered at its session, their respective content and expected date of issuance. During the first part of the session, members of the Committee expressed their appreciation to the Department for the timely availability of the documentation.

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean does not have pre-session documentation of a substantive nature prepared by the Secretariat.

The Committee on Relations with the Host Country has no pre-session documentation.

The International Law Commission highlighted the spirit of cooperation in the relations between the secretariat of the Commission and conference services as well as the diligent application of all relevant General Assembly resolutions.

The Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters and the expert group to prepare a study on disarmament and non-proliferation education reported that, in their work, the issue of availability of pre-session documentation does not apply.

United Nations A/56/300

General Assembly

Distr.: General
15 August 2001

Original: English

Fifty-sixth session
Item 136 of the provisional agenda*
Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General on submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule**

Summary

The present report describes the measures taken by the Secretariat to strengthen responsibility and accountability in the submission of documentation, inter alia, programming and monitoring the submission process, regular meetings of focal points for documentation and planning meetings with substantive departments and bureaux of intergovernmental organs. The report also proposes measures that could lead to the timely issuance of documentation.

* A/56/150.

** Consultations within the Secretariat and follow-up action required time and delayed the preparation of the present report.

01-51241 (E) 170801

I. Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in section III of its resolution 55/222 of 23 December 2000, requested the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages of the General Assembly; it also requested the Secretary-General to strengthen accountability and responsibility measures, where applicable, as requested in section C, paragraph 11, of its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, to correct the alarming situation concerning the submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule and requested him to submit a report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-sixth session.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly also invited intergovernmental bodies, during their organizational sessions or other appropriate periods before the commencement of their substantive work, to review with author departments the question of the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of those bodies and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session through the Committee on Conferences. A compilation of replies received from some of the bodies will be presented in a separate report to the General Assembly.

II. Strengthening accountability and responsibility in the preparation of documentation

A. Programming and monitoring of documentation

3. As part of its core responsibilities, the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, through its Documentation Programming and Monitoring Unit, has assumed the functions of coordinating the submission of documentation for the General Assembly, its General Committee, its Main Committees and its various subsidiary organs, as well as for the Economic and Social Council and most of its subsidiary bodies. A computerized database application has successfully replaced, at no additional cost, the traditional paper-based management system. This has greatly simplified and enhanced the efficiency of retrieving and analysing documentation-related information and, by providing more readily available information, has increased the awareness and accountability on the part of submitting departments. The database can also query and generate customized documentation status reports for the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, thus making the following initiatives possible:

(a) Documentation requests by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, mainly contained in the resolutions and decisions adopted towards the end of each session, are now compiled by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. This information is circulated to the respective author departments/offices more quickly, enabling them to get an early start in the drafting process;

(b) Status reports, sorted by author department, provide assistance in the monitoring of the documentation and delivery schedule. The reports serve as a reminder of documents due and their submission deadlines;

(c) For each session, customized information on compliance with documentation submission deadlines can be generated, sorted by organ or author department. This information assists servicing secretariats and author departments in identifying problems and making improvements in their future work.

B. Focal points for documentation

4. In order to strengthen documentation accountability and responsibility, a liaison network was formally established, consisting of focal points from all author departments, funds and programmes, the specialized agencies and duty stations away from Headquarters. This network helps to identify the chain of responsibility in the preparation of documentation and improve coordination of document submissions from author departments. Periodic meetings are held with all the focal points and representatives of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to plan and review the timing and other requirements of document submissions and to inform and discuss the rules and regulations pertaining to the preparation of documentation.

C. Planning meeting

5. In the past, ad hoc consultations have taken place between the servicing secretariats and bureaux of the intergovernmental bodies on the one hand, and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services on the other. During the past year, in accordance with paragraph 1 of section III of General Assembly resolution 55/222, the Department has initiated planning meetings with the servicing secretariats and substantive departments, bearing in mind all the relevant rules and regulations, including the 10-week rule for document submission.

D. Documentation forecast

6. While the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services continues to rely on documentation forecasts to plan its allocation of resources, difficulties persist in obtaining accurate forecasts of the volume and timing of documentation from author departments. Further efforts are required on the part of the submitting departments to provide more precise documentation forecasts as an effective planning tool for conference services.

E. Footnotes

7. The General Assembly, in its resolution 55/222, reiterated its decision that if a report is submitted late to conference services, the reasons therefor should be included in a footnote to the document. That request was first introduced for documentation of the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly. Out of a total of 462 pre-session documents, 365 (79 per cent) were submitted after the 4 July deadline (the date by which documents should have been submitted in compliance with the 10-week rule). Roughly half of these late submissions carried footnotes provided by the author department.

8. Among reasons given for late submission were the need to include more up-to-date information or developments, the need for lengthy consultations before preparation of reports, late receipt of inputs from Member States and/or other departments/agencies and the fact that events reported on were scheduled too close to the session of the General Assembly.

III. Suggested actions

A. Processing late submissions

9. Late submission continues to be the main cause for the low rate of compliance with the six-week rule on the issuance of documentation. When a document is submitted late, in consultation with the substantive secretariat and the bureau of the body concerned, and in order to minimize the negative impact of late submissions by one intergovernmental organ on the timely issuance of documents for other organs, the late submission could be processed by rescheduling the processing of other documents submitted for consideration by the same body after a review of the overall documentation of the intergovernmental organ concerned.

B. Periodicity of reporting cycles

10. Reporting cycles of intergovernmental bodies that end close to the opening of the session at which their reports are considered make timely submission impossible and result in late issuance. Intergovernmental organs could review their reporting cycles with a view to either changing the reporting period in order to allow for adequate time for the drafting of their report or introducing periodicity in the form of quarterly or biannual instead of annual reports. Accordingly, instead of voluminous reports submitted late for processing, the reports would be submitted and issued in instalments, allowing ample time for conference services to process the documents and provide timely information to Member States.

C. Submission of addenda to update information

11. In a number of cases, author departments delay submission in order to include the most up-to-date information in their reports. Intergovernmental organs may wish to authorize substantive departments to prepare reports with an earlier cut-off date, with the possibility of including additional information, if necessary, in addenda to the parent document. This suggested action could work similarly to the one described in paragraph 10 above.

D. Adjusting the programme of work

12. While reviewing the status of documentation, and in cases of recurrent late submissions, servicing secretariats and bureaux of intergovernmental bodies may wish to adjust their programme of work by delaying or postponing consideration of related items or documents. This practice is actually followed by several bodies and requires adjusting programmes of work to the realities of documentation.

IV. Conclusions

13. **To remedy the situation of late issuance of documentation, a concerted effort on the part of the Member States and the Secretariat is necessary. While steps are being taken in the Secretariat to coordinate the preparation of reports at an earlier stage and to improve the monitoring of their submission for processing, the recommendations of the Committee on Conferences in its report to the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly,[1] some of which have been repeated above, can also play a role at the processing stage of documentation. As previously noted, intergovernmental organs and Member States, by limiting their requests for documentation, can also contribute to ameliorating the situation. Rationalizing of programmes of work along the lines proposed in numerous resolutions can be of further help in this regard.**

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth session, Supplement No. 32* (A/55/32), paras. 109 and 110.